

Buddhist Ethics: Compassion for All

By Dr. Lisa Kemmerer

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*All beings tremble before danger, all fear death.
(Dhammapada 54)*

Buddhist scriptures encourage universal compassion. Buddhist teachings are overwhelmingly friendly toward non-human animals. While one might find the occasional Buddhist writer who believes that animals are expendable to our purposes, that the pain of other creatures does not matter spiritually, that we may eat animals and wear animals and kill animals, most Buddhists would disagree. The overwhelming majority of Buddhist writings do not support this contention.

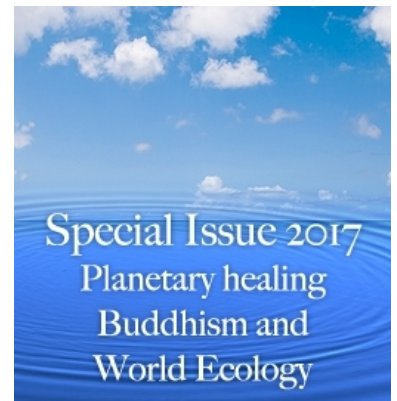
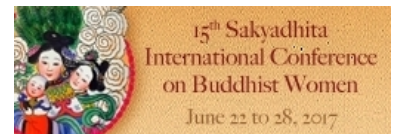
There is no clear distinction between non-humans and humans in Buddhist philosophy. Eons of transmigration have had a predictable result: today's duck and dog are yesterday's human sisters and brothers. Each cow and chicken was at some point one's parent, and to harm one's parent is a particularly base act for Buddhists. All species are also subject to the same karmic process. *Karma* can no more be avoided by a Persian cat than it can by an *avahi* (woolly lemur). The *Sutta Pi??ka* notes that one's actions determine one's future as surely as "the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage" (Burt 52). *Karma* rules the lives of animals and humans alike (Kraft 277): Lassie and the Prince of Wales are both subject to the same moral laws.

Buddhism offers a vision of radical inter-identification. A vision where all living beings are identified with all other entities. This vision does not merely teach that we are all in this together, but that we all *are* this, "rising and falling as one living body" (Cook 229). Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

A human being is an animal, a part of nature. But we single ourselves out from the rest of nature. We classify other animals and living beings as nature, as if we ourselves are not part of it. Then we pose the question,



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“How should I deal with Nature?” We should deal with nature the way we deal with ourselves! Harming nature is harming ourselves, and vice versa. (Hanh 41)

Radical Buddhist interdependence does not allow for an independent entity, action, word, or thought; all things influence all other things. Each being, each act, is critical to every other being and every other act. To cause suffering to a dog or pig is to cause suffering to oneself. The idea of radical interdependence led some Buddhists to conclude that all things *are* one another *in their very essence*.

Hua-yen Buddhism carried “co-dependent arising” to its logical extreme. Co-dependent arising means that our existence is best understood through the image of an infinitely regressing mirror that encompasses the entire universe in “simultaneous *mutual identity* and *mutual intercausality*” (Cook 214). Nothing is independent in this “vast web of interdependencies in which if one strand is disturbed, the whole web is shaken” (Cook 213).

Also in China, the influential T’ien T’ai Mahāyāna Buddhist school teaches that all things are contained in one moment and one moment contains all things. This combination of single and universal in one unity culminated in the concept of “Buddha-Nature” (deBary 156–57). “Buddha-Nature” is nirvāṇa in *saṃsāra*, perfection in the mundane, the Buddha in each of us and in every living thing. “*Buddha-Nature*” is the *inherent perfection of each thing as it naturally is. All things have “Buddha-Nature,” and to acknowledge this quality is to realize that all things are perfect in their essence, just as they are.* In the T’ien T’ai vision, everything has inherent value, spiritual value, and one can learn important religious truths from every aspect of the physical world.

Buddhist moral conduct is “built on the vast conception of universal love and compassion for all living beings” (Rahula 46). Buddhism inherited *ahiṃsa* from its land of birth, India, and added some uniquely Buddhist expressions of this universal moral ideal, such as *metta* (loving-kindness) and *karuṇā* (compassion). Compassion toward non-human animals has a high profile in the ancient and foundational Buddhist Pāli Canon, as well as in extracanonical writings (Waldau 149). Buddhist literature features prominent injunctions not to kill any living being (Waldau 136). The *Dhammapada*, a popular and important text in the Buddhist canon, teaches that those who follow the Buddha will not only avoid causing harm, but will, “ever by night and day,” “find joy in love for all beings” (78).

In the Buddhist teachings, animals are not lesser or “other.” This ethic is consistent with Buddhist philosophies of karma and oneness. For a Buddhist practitioner, harm done to others is harm done to oneself, for we are all one, and we are bound by *karma*. The *Bodhicaryavatāra* of Shantideva (circa 600 CE) teaches that fellow-creatures are *the same* as the practitioner. The Buddhist is to remember that “All have the same sorrows, the same joys” and must be protected (Burt 139). We are all equally fellow creatures. “There is never a hint in Buddhist teachings that intellectual ability, a sophisticated sense of self, or any characteristic beyond the ability to suffer is relevant to moral standing” (Phelps 40).

Buddhism teaches followers to exhibit “an unlimited self-giving compassion flowing freely toward all creatures that live” (Burt 46). “Indeed, Buddhists see this orientation to the suffering of

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others as a sine qua non of ethical life" (Waldau 138). The virtue of compassion is "one of the indispensable conditions for deliverance" (Kushner 148f); the Dali Lama has often stated that loving-kindness *is* his religion (Gyatso 8). One who is cruel will not attain to *nirvāṇa*; only those who "hurt no living being" will reach *nirvāṇa* (*Dhammapada* 68). A truly great person is not one who succeeds in worldly matters, but one who "hurts not any living being" (*Dhammapada* 74). Buddhists are to vow: "With all am I a friend, comrade to all/And to all creatures kind and merciful" (Burt 79). The Buddhist *Sutta-Nipāṭa* includes the following beautiful contribution to spiritual literature encouraging compassion in humankind:

May all be blessed with peace always;
all creatures weak or strong,
all creatures great and small;

Creatures unseen or seen
dwelling afar or near,
born or awaiting birth,
—may all be blessed with peace!

... As with her own life
a mother shields from hurting her own,
her only child, —
let all-embracing thoughts
for all that lives be thine,
—an all-embracing love
for all the universe (Burt 46–47).

Compassion is expected of monks, saints, and *all* Buddhists, "*ahiṃsā*," or non-injury, is an ethical goal" for every Buddhist (Shinn 219). Those who successfully travel the Buddhist path will be filled with mercy, living a life that is "compassionate and kind to all creatures" (Burt 104).

Buddhist teachings state that the moral ideal is to reduce suffering—flesh eating (as well as drinking the nursing milk of factory-farmed animals) fosters massive amounts of misery among millions of animals. Factory farmed animals are deprived of freedom, their young, their nursing milk, their eggs, and ultimately their lives. To support industries that cause such suffering is to live a life that is spiritually impoverished.

For the Buddhist, good conduct requires "putting away the killing of living things" and holding "aloof from the destruction of life" (Burt 104).

All beings tremble before danger, all fear death. When a man considers this, he does not kill or cause to kill.
All beings fear before danger, life is dear to all. When a man considers this, he does not kill or cause to kill.
He who for the sake of happiness hurts others who also want happiness, shall not hereafter find happiness.
He who for the sake of happiness does not hurt others who also want happiness, shall hereafter find happiness (*Dhammapada* 54).

An enlightened human is one who, "whether feeble or strong, does not kill nor cause slaughter" (Burt 71). It matters little who kills the turkey; the one who buys a dead bird *causes* another to be raised and killed, and has thereby *caused* unnecessary suffering. Buddhist philosophy teaches that a flesh-eater can no more avoid negative *karma* from eating flesh, than one can escape the effects of dust thrown into the wind. Those who seek

happiness in this life but cause misery to others “will not find happiness after death” (Burt 59).

The first, and most fundamental Buddhist precept requires followers to refrain from killing—not just human beings, but all living beings. This prescription against killing “is central to the Buddhist tradition. Indeed, it is in fact one of the few common features across the vast Buddhist tradition and its many sects, strands, and branches” (Waldau 143).

In the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, spiritual adepts called “bodhisattvas” commit themselves to the task of saving *all* creatures from suffering. Bodhisattvas vow to return to the earth again and again through reincarnation, rather than disappear into nirvāṇa. They come back to suffer the trials and tribulations of life in order to help *every individual of every species* to escape from ongoing suffering and rebirth.

Compassion is given an especially prominent place in the Mahāyāna branch of the Buddhist tradition by virtue of its association with the central ideal of the Bodhisattva, although concern for living things is conceptually no less central in the Theravādin branch. The Bodhisattva is known, and even defined, by his or her commitment to the salvation of other beings. (Waldau 138)

A Bodhisattva thinks: “As many beings as there are in the universe of beings,” with or without form, with or without perception, “all these I must lead to Nirvāṇa” (Conze 164). Buddhist sūtras explain a Bodhisattva’s commitment:

A Bodhisattva resolves: I take upon myself the burden of all suffering, I am resolved to do so, I will endure it. I do not turn or run away, do not tremble, am not terrified, nor afraid, do not turn back or despond. And why? At all costs I must bear the burdens of all beings. In that I do not follow my own inclinations. I have made the vow to save all beings. All beings I must set free. The whole world of living beings I must rescue, from the terrors of birth, of old age, of sickness, of death and rebirth, of all kinds of moral offence, of all states of woe, of the whole cycle of birth-and-death... from all these terrors I must rescue all beings... I must rescue all these beings from the stream of Saṁsāra, which is so difficult to cross; I must pull them back from the great precipice, I must free them from all calamities, I must ferry them across the stream of Saṁsāra. I myself must grapple with the whole mass of suffering of all beings. (Burt 133)

Buddhist animal tales “illustrate and underscore the position that life from one form to the next is continuous,” through reincarnation, and that compassion for all creatures is foundational in the Buddhist religion (Chapple 143). The *Jātaka* tell of the Buddha’s past incarnations. *Jātaka* stories focus on animals as individuals, with personality, volition, flaws, and moral excellence. Buddhists are often introduced to *Jātaka* tales at a young age, and they begin to learn that a rabbit is not just an alien other, a thing, but an individual, a member of a rabbit community, and also a member of a larger community that includes all life. The *Jātaka* help remind Buddhists of the significance of other species, and instruct Buddhists to live mindfully—with an awareness of the likely effects of each and every action, and the knowledge that human actions toward spiders and piglets matters not only to the spider and the pig, but also in an ultimate sense—to one’s future existences.

J?taka stories of self-sacrificing compassion, stories of the Buddha's earlier lives, remind readers and listeners that the Buddha has been in many forms, as have all living beings. No animal is so very insignificant or "undesirable" that he or she is unable to house the karmic presence of a future Buddha; no animal is morally irrelevant. *J?taka* stories reveal "the essence of the Buddhist attitude... the attitude of universal compassion... flowing from the knowledge of inner oneness" (Martin 98). In the *J?taka*, "animals have their own lives, their own karma, tests, purposes, and aspirations. And, as often brief and painful as their lives may be, they are also graced with a purity and a clarity which we can only humbly respect, and perhaps even occasionally envy" (Martin 100).

Animals in the *J?taka* speak out against harming other species, against animal sacrifice, and against hunting and eating animals (Chapple 135–38). Readers are constantly reminded that the hare or the deer in the story eventually became the Buddha. Those who eat cattle and pigs, hens and turkeys, who consume the nursing milk meant for calves and the eggs of abused hens, are warned that they might well be consuming a future Buddha, or causing unnecessary suffering to a future Buddha. How many Bodhisattvas and future Buddhas are now among us in animal form, and how is our spiritual journey affected if we carelessly harm them?

Kuan Yin, the Bodhisattva of compassion, *is compassion itself*. "Kuan-yin" means "She Who Listens to the World's Sounds," revealing her role as the compassionate assistant to all who find themselves in distress (Kinsley, *Goddesses*' 35). Like all Bodhisattvas, her goal is to free *all* sentient beings from suffering, to help "all beings on earth to attain enlightenment" (Sommer 127; Storm 194). Kuan Yin embodies Buddhist spiritual perfection—wisdom *and* love; she is the "essence of mercy and compassion" (Kinsley, *Goddesses*' 26). Kuan-yin "is a state of perfection" (Kinsley, *Goddesses*' 51). In the Buddhist worldview, those who are knowledgeable, those who are spiritually enlightened, are also compassionate. To be cruel is to be spiritually ignorant. To be perfectly compassionate is to be perfect. To eat or otherwise harm other animals is not compassionate, is not consistent with Buddhist morality.

Kuan-yin *is what each of us is meant to be*—what we are to strive for. Practitioners are not just to cry out for Kuan-yin's assistance, but to cultivate the spiritual virtues of this great bodhisattva: compassion, mercy, and selflessness toward all (Kinsley, *Goddesses*' 51). Buddhists devoted to Kuan-yin are expected to do their share of listening, to do their part in healing the wounds of the world, and to aid those who cry out in agony, whether cat or kinkajou. Buddhist choices might well begin with diet—"what will you have for lunch?"

Buddhism is a practical religion aimed at salvation; acts of kindness and generosity are critical to Buddhist salvation. Buddhist philosophy teaches that people are merely one small ephemeral part of an interconnected and interdependent universe. The core of Buddhist spiritual practice is loving-kindness and compassion; the first precept condemns killing. Teachings of karma and reincarnation reinforce this spiritual imperative: the chicken on our plate was once our best friend; our teacher, our beloved, may be a bodhisattva or future Buddha, and we will suffer in the future for any suffering we cause. Buddhism entails a philosophy that is sensitive to the pains and needs of animals, and this philosophy is not merely

peripheral, but belongs “to the core of the tradition” forming “the foundation of Buddhist morality” (Waldau 138).

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